

Crime in the Commonwealth

1988-1998



Commonwealth of Virginia
James S. Gilmore III, Governor
December 1999

Report Staff

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Research Center Mission

The mission of the Criminal Justice Research Center is to provide accurate and comprehensive data and research to guide strategic, policy and budgetary decision-making on criminal justice issues, policies and programs. The Center is responsible for the coordination, collection, statistical analysis and interpretation of system-wide data on crime and criminals in Virginia.

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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

The Governor's New Partnership Commission for Community Safety



October 14, 1999

The Honorable James S. Gilmore
Governor
State Capitol
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Governor Gilmore:

As Co-Chairs of your New Partnership Commission, it is our pleasure to present you with this report, "Crime in The Commonwealth."

The Commission requested the development of this report in the belief that it would help all of us, public officials and private citizens alike, better understand the scope and nature of our crime and safety problems. We also hope it will provide a sound basis for charting new initiatives in criminal justice.

As you will see when you review this report, the news about crime in the Commonwealth is very positive. Reported crime rates are down, violent crime in 1998 was at a ten-year low, and Virginia's violent crime rates are substantially lower than most of its neighboring states and of the nation as a whole.

In our view, the report shows that we are all benefiting from the work of you and your predecessor in abolishing parole, reforming criminal sentencing, re-vamping our juvenile justice system and strengthening law enforcement.

The report indicates that there is still work to be done. Illegal drugs continue to ruin too many lives, and gun violence still threatens too many neighborhoods. We are optimistic that your new initiatives in these areas will produce positive results to be reflected in a future crime report.

In closing, we would like to express the Commission's appreciation to the staff of the Department of Criminal Justice Services who worked long and hard to produce this report.

We and the Commission stand ready to assist you in any way we can to make the Commonwealth an even safer place to live.

Sincerely,

Mark L. Earley
Attorney General

Kenneth W. Stolle
Senate of Virginia

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Introduction

This report was prepared for the Governor's New Partnership Commission, chaired by Attorney General Mark L. Earley and Senator Kenneth W. Stolle. The Commission was directed by Governor Gilmore to advise him on ways to make Virginia's communities safer. The Commission is unique in that its perspective extends beyond the crime fighting roles of law enforcement and the criminal justice system to include core societal institutions such as families, schools, churches and neighborhoods.

Virginia and the nation have recently enjoyed several years of sharply declining crime rates, especially for violent crimes. However, the 10-year period covered by this report began with widely publicized increases in crime which stimulated increasing public concern over crime and safety issues.

In 1988, a national Gallop poll asked Americans "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" Only 2% of Americans said crime and violence was the most important problem. By 1998, roughly a decade later, fully 20% of Americans answering the same question said crime and violence was the most important problem facing the nation. Indeed, in 1998, crime and violence was cited as the country's single most important problem, ranking above other important issues such as education, the economy, and the environment.

In Virginia, state and local public safety officials are faced with the task of responding to concerns about crime and violence. Although Virginia traditionally enjoys lower crime rates than the nation, Virginia rates—especially violent crime rates—increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To formulate sound and effective policies to deal with crime and violence, public safety officials need comprehensive, objective information about the nature and extent of crime and violence in Virginia. Such information is often hard to locate. Like many others, public safety policy makers are bombarded by conflicting views about crime, views often shaped by myth, misconception, ideology, and what has been called "sound-bite criminal justice." These officials need better information to

exercise their responsibility to deliberate and decide "what to do" about crime in the Commonwealth.

This report is designed to provide criminal justice officials and the public with the information they need to help them understand and deal with crime in Virginia. The report attempts to provide answers to major questions such as:

- How has crime changed over the last 10 years?
- What are the major trends for violent, property and drug crime, and how are they changing?
- How does crime in Virginia compare with crime in the U.S. and other states?
- Where are crimes occurring in Virginia?
- What major initiatives and legislation has Virginia implemented to response to crime?

This report attempts to provide objective, comprehensive information in several ways. First, it uses official crime statistics collected from state and local agencies across the Commonwealth to provide quantifiable information, not speculation and anecdote. Second, it uses data from throughout the criminal justice system—from arrest through incarceration—to provide a broad perspective on crime. Third, it puts Virginia crime in perspective by comparing Virginia crime rates to those of the nation and neighboring states, and by presenting and comparing rates for all cities and counties within Virginia. Finally, this report provides information spanning at least ten years, from 1988 to 1998, to indicate how crime has changed during the last decade.

This report is organized in several sections. Section I presents a 10-year overview of major crime trends in Virginia. Sections II through IV present specific information on violent, property and drug crimes. Trends within each of these major crime categories are examined in detail, and information on the offenders who commit these types of crimes is presented. Section V recognizes the growing emphasis on victims of crime in Virginia by providing information on the rights and services Virginia provides to crime victims. Section VI of the report presents an overview of initiatives Virginia has developed in response to crime.

This report draws on many official sources of data on crime and offenders, but these sources have limitations. In some cases, data collected from one part of the criminal justice system may not be as complete, timely or accurate as data from other parts. Whenever there are caveats to be made about the data used and presented, these are noted in the report.

Whether the current declines in crime rates continue into the year 2000 and beyond remains to be seen. However, public safety officials and the public will continue to be challenged to make Virginia's citizens and families safer from crime. This and future reports are offered to provide information needed to help meet this challenge.

This report is the most recent in a series of report by the Department of Criminal Justice Services Research Center. The others are *Violent Crime in Virginia*, published in 1989; *Drugs in Virginia: A Criminal Justice Perspective*, 1991; *Guns and Violent Crime*, 1994; and *Juvenile Murder in Virginia: A Study of Arrests and Conviction*, 1996.

Summary of Selected Findings

■ The two major measures of crime in the Commonwealth—rates of index offenses reported and arrests made—showed significant reductions in crime between 1988 and 1998. Reported index crime rates dropped by 16% during this period, and arrest rates dropped by 15%. Virginia's rate of reported crimes in 1998 was the lowest it has been since 1975. (2, 3)

■ In 1998, the reported violent crime rate in Virginia reached a 10-year low. Virginia's 1995–1997 violent crime rate was much lower than the national rate, and was below the rates for the surrounding states of Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina and Tennessee. (4, 5)

■ Generally, localities that had the Commonwealth's highest violent crime rates from 1988 to 1990 continued to have the highest rates in 1996–1998. However, many of these localities have seen significant drops in their violent crime rates during these last three years. (6)

■ Adult and juvenile arrest rates for all major types of violent crime have declined from their higher levels in the early and mid-1990s. However, in 1998 rates for some types of violent crime still remained above their 1988 levels. Adult arrest rates for murder, rape and robbery decreased from 1988 to 1998, but juvenile arrest rates tended to remain the same or increase. (12, 13)

■ Firearms were used in more than two-thirds of the homicides committed in Virginia between 1988 and 1998. Firearms were also used in about 40% to 50% of the robberies and about 15% to 20% of the aggravated assaults committed during this period. (14, 15)

■ Nearly 50% of the violent felony offenders convicted in Virginia from 1995 to 1997 were under the age of 25. More than 90% were males, and 70% were minorities. About three-quarters of these felons already had a prior criminal conviction. More than 50% had a prior felony conviction, and more than 25% had a prior conviction for another violent felony offense. More than one-third of all these offenders had another family member with a prior felony conviction. (17, 18)

■ Reported property crime rates in Virginia declined by 17% from 1988 to 1998, and Virginia's 1998 property crime rate was the lowest in the last 10 years. Virginia's 1995–1997 property crime rate was significantly below the national rate and lower than the rate for three of the five bordering states. (20, 21)

■ Adult and juvenile arrest rates for burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson declined from 1988 to 1998. Overall, juveniles were arrested for property crimes at a much higher rate than adults throughout this period. (28, 29)

■ Unlike offenders convicted for violent felonies, convicted property crime felons in Virginia were about equally divided between whites and minorities. Almost 80% of persons convicted of a property felony in Virginia from 1995 to 1997 had at least one prior criminal conviction. (31, 33)

■ Arrest rates for drug offenses increased by 60% in Virginia from 1988 to 1998, with most of the increases occurring in 1994 and 1995. In 1998 more than 30,000 drug arrests were made in Virginia. (34)

■ Virginia's 1995–1997 drug arrest rate was well below the national average, but was higher than the rate for three of the five states that border Virginia. Rural localities had the lowest drug arrest rates over the last decade, but many of these localities experienced major increases in their rates during this time. (35, 36)

■ Males between the ages of 15 and 24 were disproportionately involved in both narcotics sales and homicides in Virginia's major urban areas. In 1998, young males comprised about eight percent of the population in Virginia's three largest urban areas, but comprised between 40% and 50% of those arrested for narcotics sales and for homicide in these areas. (44, 45)

■ More than half of persons convicted for felony drug offenses in Virginia from 1995 to 1997 were under age 30, and more than a third were under age 25. Almost 75% were minorities, but this varied with the type of drugs involved. Minorities comprised 90% of the convictions for selling

cocaine and crack, and 77% of convictions for possession of cocaine and crack. In contrast, whites comprised 77% of the convictions for selling marijuana, and 74% of convictions for marijuana possession. (47)

■ About 75% of persons convicted in Virginia for a felony drug offense had a prior criminal conviction. Persons convicted of selling drugs were more likely to have a prior conviction than persons convicted of drug possession. (49)

■ During the 1990s, Virginia took major steps to recognize crime victims and to provide victims of crime with important rights and services. The 1995 Crime Victim and Witness Rights Act and a 1996 amendment to the Constitution of Virginia are designed to ensure that victims are heard during criminal cases processing, that they are treated with dignity and respect, and that they receive authorized services. (51)

■ Virginia responded to rising crime rates of the late 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s by enacting various major criminal justice initiatives. Using technological advances, Virginia developed an offender DNA databank and an instant criminal record background check system. Broader "system reform" legislation in 1994 eliminated the parole system and established a truth-in-sentencing system to ensure that felony offenders serve at least 85% of their court-imposed prison sentence, and similar broad legislation passed in 1996 significantly enhanced accountability and penalties for juvenile criminal offenders. (52–57)